

Remembering the Late Professor Sai Aung Tun (1932-2020)

A Reflection on His Contributions to the Tai Shan Communities

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Sai Aung Tun, author of the *History of the Shan State, from Its Origin to 1962*, was a respected historian in the academic communities in Myanmar (Burma) and a well-known figure for his native Tai/Shan communities. After he passed away on 25 September 2020, many people, especially those from different corners of the Tai Shan communities, shared their grievances on social media and praised him for his tireless work contributed to the communities.



Sai Aung Tun

Source : <https://commons.wikimedia.org>

Sai Aung Tun was born in 1932 at Tabok Village in Hsipaw, northern Shan State. After graduated BA honors in history from the University of Yangon (Rangoon) in 1957, he was awarded a scholarship for postgraduate study at the University of Denver, USA, where he earned an MA in International Relations in 1958.

Sai Aung Tun had a long and eventful career in the Higher Education sector of Myanmar, contributing his academic and administrative services at several institutions. His notable appointments include: Head of Department of History, Taunggyi College (now Taunggyi University; 1961), Department of History, Arts & Science University, Mandalay (1964), Head of Dept of History, Magwe College (1968), Principal, Myitkyina College (now Myitkyina University) (1970), and Principal, Institute of Foreign Languages, Yangon (1980).

During his lifelong career, Sai Aung Tun was actively involved in the promotion of Shan literary and cultural programmes. While working at colleges and universities, he often spent times outside his official work hours teaching the 'new Shan scripts' to Shan university students and led them organising literary and cultural activities including the running of Shan language courses to young Shan children during summer vacations. The new Shan writing script was developed from around 1940, and this system has since been known as the new Shan script (Lik Tai Mai) in contrast to the one used before that as the old Shan script (Lik Tai Kao). The development of the new Shan script itself took several years.

But it took more than three decades for the new Shan script to be widely recognised, gradually replacing the old system. So, roughly between the 1940s and 1980s, the two systems (old Shan

script and new Shan script) were used side by side. As the old generation preferred and insisted on using the old system, young educated people had to work hard in promoting the new system.

Shan university students and young monks, who made efforts to promote the use of the new Shan scripts, were often accused of being political activists, and subsequently many of them were jailed by authorities. The worst times were between the middle 1960s and late 1980s. Sai Aung Tun is one of only a few educated Shans who could survive throughout those years.

He was one of the very few educated Shans of his generation, who was able to work within the cycle of the government administration and at the same time made his contributions for the Shan communities along the way. He was a member of the government's State Council from 1985 to 1988, and in 1992 he was appointed as the Vice-Chair of the Myanmar Historical Commission and Emeritus Professor of International Relations of the University of Yangon.

After retiring from teaching, and while still serving as vice-chair of the Myanmar Historical Commission, he continued and in fact spent more time on his works for the promotion of Shan history, language, cultures and identities. He became a head figure for frontline Shan events, such as the annual Shan New Year and other cultural and religious events, where he was invited to give keynote speeches. He also dedicated more time on doing research and giving paper presentations at academic conferences nationally and internationally.

One of his legacy of works is the book, *History of the Shan State, from Its Origin to 1962*, published in 2008. He spent years doing research and gathering information for the book, and members of the Shan community in the UK, led by Venerable Pof. Dr Khammai Dhammasami, founder of the Oxford Buddha Vihara and the Shan State Buddhist University, has good memories of giving our support to his research and gathering historical documents mainly from the British Library and the Cambridge University Library. We had another opportunity to support him again during his last trip to the UK to participate in a Shan Study Panel of the ASEASUK Conference held at Cambridge University in 2011.

During his life, Sai Aung Tun made an extremely valuable contribution to education sectors and social engagements in Myanmar, especially on the Shan history, language, culture and identity.

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Notes for further reading

1. <https://youtu.be/Bw3pdfr0FhQ>
2. <https://w.wiki/CYzK>